No. 42

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

"Come now, Talbot," he said contemptuously. "You are either a fool or a hero. I warned you once never to cross my path again, and yet I find you on my own yacht playing the valet."

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VICTOR TALBOT had sufficient self-command to restrain himself from treating the cur — Roger Hawkins as he deserved. "You ran into me intentionally, and I demand an apology," he reiterated in somewhat louder tones.

Again Hawkins laughed in a malicious manner. "I don't know what you want—do you wish to make trouble? You can't have any with me—and I will ask you not to try to teach me manners."

"Very well, I shall have satisfaction, Mr. Hawkins, you will have to explain your rudeness at the proper time and place," exclaimed Victor, hardly able to restrain himself longer.

This exchange of words had attracted the attention of the bystanders. Hawkins gave no answer but went on.

Talbot's anger was such that he scarcely knew what he was doing. Mechanically he walked into the ball room as if he knew not where he was.

An anxious voice at his side brought him to himself.

"Victor, for heaven's sake, what trouble have you had with Mr. Hawkins? I heard that you had a quarrel with him—what has happened?"

Troubled, and trembling from anxiety, Lillian stood beside him. Talbot breathed deeply and passed his hand over his hot brow.

"He has carried out a scheme to insult me," he said slowly. "He ran into me intentionally in the doorway, and when I asked him to apologize, he answered improperly. But I will soon call him to account and punish him as he deserves."

"Victor, I beg of you — be calm," she warned. "See, we are being watched from all sides. He must have had too much wine—he has been drinking— you

should not have noticed him at all."

"Lillian, then I would have had no self-respect," he replied. "He was so utterly impertinent, that I simply had to stop him. My dear, how you tremble! Do not take it so to heart. See I am calm again. Are you satisfied, now?"

She smiled, but her troubled gaze still rested on the heightened color on his face.

They had but little opportunity to say more to each other as Mrs. Crawford soon called her step-daughter to her side.

Talbot found the ball and the gayeties unendurable and quietly left the house. He felt easier when he stepped out into the clear night and he made up his mind to walk home. He felt that he would be the better for it. He had not had a very pleasant evening.

First, the news from Lillian that Mrs. Crawford intended to take her away on her travels, then his encounter with Hawkins.

Thoughts of the latter gave way to his concern for Lillian. What could he do to lighten her burdens? He must think out some plan.

The thought that troubled him most was that he could do nothing to lessen Mrs. Crawford's power over the girl and only an exceptionally strong nature could be steadfast under the machinations of this woman.

Could Lillian hold out? Would her resistance finally weaken, and would she at last, to find peace, submit to Mrs. Crawford's will?

While Victor was sturdily walking toward home, the ball was drawing to its end.

Lillian had noticed Victor's departure, for his eyes had sought her everywhere and found her before he left; and now that he was gone she longed to be in her own quiet room.

Strange to say, Mrs. Crawford, too, was weary and before Lillian spoke of her wish to go home, she told the latter to prepare to leave.

Mrs. Crawford was in a state approaching desperation.

The knowledge that her step-daughter was cognizant of the motives of her conduct, humiliated her and she realized that it would almost make impossible their living together.

The feeling she now experienced toward the girl was one even more intense than that of hatrd.

During their ride home, not a word was exchanged. Lillian's thoughts were occupied with Victor, while Mrs. Crawford sought for a plan which would take her step-daughter out of Talbot's reach.

Chapter 136

FOILED

VICTOR TALBOT was a man with an unusual amount of common sense. He never lost his head in a crisis. But it has been said that a man desperately in love is half insane. While this could not exactly be said about Talbot, yet those who knew him best shook their heads in a dubious manner. They had watched a great change come over him, and it was most decidedly not a change for the better.

From a good-natured gentleman who followed agriculture, he had been transformed into a surly brute keenly disliked by all with whom he came in personal contact.

And then, suddenly, another change swept him. He came home one night singing softly to himself.

The next day he made a hurried trip to Chicago, where he exchanged a neat sum of money for a plain gold band ring set with diamonds. Lillian Crawford had at last been won over to his way of thinking.

She had agreed to a secret marriage, and Victor was about the happiest man in all the world.

Events had moved rapidly during the past few days in the Crawford home.

Roger Hawkins, who had grown impatient and apprehensive at the delay in the fulfillment of his hopes, had insisted upon hurrying on his marriage to the lovely Lillian.

Mrs. Crawford had brought all her influence to bear on the Chicago clubman's side, and with a shrewd idea as to the way things were drifting, had ceased to

invite Victor Talbot to her home.

There had been more than one stormy scene between Mrs. Crawford and her step-daughter, but after a week of tension, of tears and threats, a strange calm had settled down.

And this calm was largely due to the fact that the lovers had decided to take matters in their own hands.

Again Victor Talbot and Lillian met at their secret trysting place. He took her in his arms and put the ring on her finger.

"It doesn't seem possible that this is really my wedding ring, and that I am going to be married to you to-morrow," she said with tears in her eyes. "Oh, if we are found out?" she added with a little shiver.

"Ah, it is a glorious reality, sweetheart," he told her as he kissed that sweet pouting mouth. "To-morrow I shall claim you as my very own. And don't you worry for a moment about the consequences. No power on earth can part husband and wife."

The girl snuggled closer into her lover's arms.

"I—I don't know what makes me feel so afraid," she murmured, then suddenly burst into tears.

"What, are you crying?" Victor said tenderly.

"Oh, I just can't help it," Lillian sobbed. "I feel as though I was about to commit a crime. My stepmother has so often threatened what she could do to us if you married me while under age."

Talbot laughed softly.

"Let your stepmother rave all she wants to, dear. Once the knot is tied, we'll snap our fingers at her. You love me, don't you?"

"With all my heart and soul."

"Then kiss me."

The kiss was given and returned with equal fervor. For a few more minutes the lovers talked in guard-

ed tones, and the girl, urged by an inward restlessness, returned to the house.

To her the night seemed only a hideous procession of evil fancies.

In every dream Victor Talbot was waiting for her at the church, and her step-mother was dragging her away from him.

And behind a number of shadowy figures hovered the sinister form of the strong, persistent, hated man—Rogers Hawkins.

In her waking hours she tried to reason things out. There could be no possible hitch, she tried to assure herself.

It had been agreed between Victor Talbot and herself that she should slip away from the house during the morning, ostensibly to do some shopping in the village. Victor was to meet her, and they would hurry to Chicago where the marriage was to take place.

At an early hour Lillian rose and dressed. A restless night left her nervous.

At the breaekfast table Mrs. Crawford was quick to notice the dark rings under her eyes and the feverish little spots that burned in her cheeks.

"You don't look so well this morning, my dear," she observed. 'What is the matter, Lillian? Had a poor night?"

The girl felt as though her heart had stopped beating under the close scrutiny of her step-mother's cold, searching eyes.

"I — I was awake nearly all of the night," she stammered.

Lillian's voice was so peculiar, her manner so constrained, that Mrs. Crawford looked at her in increasing wonder.

"Is there anything the matter with you?" inquired

the latter drily.

The girl shook her head.

"No, nothing, mother," came back in an agony of apprehension. "Only I am so very tired."

"You have been running around too much," the older woman went on. "What you need is a few weeks of perfect rest and a change of surroundings. And I have a pleasant surprise for you. Mr. Hawkins has invited us both to join his yachting party for a cruise on Lake Michigan."

Lillian stared at the speaker.

"Did—did you accept?" she said in a whisper.

"Of course, I accepted," was the quick response. "What else could I do? And it will be such a delightful trip, my dear child."

Somewhat to Mrs. Crawford's surprise, the girl uttered no word of protest, but sat in silence, studying the rim of the plate before her.

"It will be well for you to have a change for more than one reason," the step-mother continued in a kinder tone. "You have been worrying a great deal about Victor Talbot lately. It is about time you got all your silly, romantic notions out of your head.

"The less you see of that man, the better it will be for you. I hope you realize by this time that he is not the man for you. Don't forget that you are expected to marry a man of your own station in society."

Lillian Crawford had never done an underhanded thing in her life, and she hated the deception she was practising.

For a moment she hovered like one on the verge of tears to confess, but it was too late to draw back now.

And besides, had not Victor Talbot assured her that everything would be alright?

"If there has been any more nonsense of that sort between you it must be put to a stop at once," Mrs. Crawford went on firmly. "I have forbidden a marriage and no power on earth could make me alter my mind."

Then the young girl rose from the table, her confession frozen on her lips.

She went up to her room and began to dress for the trip to Chicago.

When she escaped from the house about an hour later, she hurried in the direction of the country road.

In her anxiety not to keep her lover waiting, she failed to observe the sport car that had just drawn up a short distance from the gate.

Lillian had a feeling as of impending disaster. A moment later she heard footsteps behind her. Her heart began to beat furiously. She was in a panic.

Suddenly a hand was laid on her shoulder.

In spite of her desperate efforts to prevent it, she was swung around, and found herself face to face with Roger Hawkins.

"Hello, Lillian," he cried with his hateful, amused smile. "Out for a walk at this early hour?"

"Yes," she answered in a frightened whisper.

"Then I will accompany you," he said coolly.

The girl's eyes grew wide as they traveled up and down the road, seeking some way to escape.

"I am afraid you must excuse me, Mr. Hawkins," she faltered, striving hard to speak natural. "I have a pressing errand to perform this morning, and I want to be alone. Please let me go, or I'll be late."

By sheer strength of will the man forced the frightened, desperate eyes to meet his gaze.

"You little fool," he said quietly. "I know your secret. You were on your way to elope with Talbot. Oh, I know all about your nice arrangement for this morn-

ng. Did you think I would let you marry that man?"

Lillian swayed unsteadily, and the man's grip tightened on her arm.

"You are coming back home with me," he told her in that same quiet, but determined tone. "We will talk this thing over with Mrs. Crawford."

And in spite of her struggles, the young girl was forced to return.

Mrs. Crawford received the shock of her life when Roger Hawkins came into the living room with Lillian as his captive.

"What in the world have you two been up to?" she demanded shrilly

"I prefer that your daughter tell you," the man grinned. "And I hope she will be truthful."

But Lillian's lips were sealed.

"Why—why don't you speak?" her step-mother cried, sensing the situation. "Out with it."

When the girl steadfastly refused to speak, Hawkins rose to the occasion. In a few terse sentences he told the story, but he failed to divulge where he got the information that Lillian was to elope with Victor Talbot.

"Go to your room, you ungrateful hussy!" the step-mother almost screamed in her towering rage. "And don't you leave it until I give you permission. I want you to remember that I am still responsible for your actions. If you try anything like that again, I'll send you to a reform school."

With her head bowed, and in tears, Lillian left the room.

In the hall she came face to face with Martha, the cook. This good old soul who had been in the employ of of the Crawfords for many years, loved Lillian.

"What is the matter now, honey?" she asked in a whisper.

"Come with me to my room and I'll tell you," the girl replied with a frightened glance at the door she had just closed behind her.

The moment these two were alone and safe in the girl's room, she broke down and threw herself across the bed. For a long time the cook watched her until she grew somewhat calm.

"Now tell me what is up, honey," she coaxed.

Lillian confessed everything.

"Oh," she sobbed, "I know they'll drag me away on that yacht trip, and I'll be forced to marry Hawkins. But I'll kill myself first."

"You won't have to do that," the older woman soothed. "I'll see to it that Mr. Talbot hears of this. That stepmother of yours ought to be strung up. She is as crooked as they make them.

"The idea of her trying to force you to marry a dirty rounder like Hawkins. Why, he is rotten to the core. I know him and his breed. He is not fit to marry a decent girl like you. And he won't if I am able to prevent it."

But there was little comfort in that for Lillian. She continued to wring her hands in mental agony.

Before Martha could speak again, a harsh knock came on the door. Then someone tried the knob, but the door would not open. It was locked.

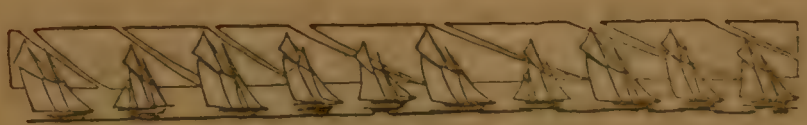
"Lillian—Lillian!" Mrs. Crawford's voice cried. "Let me in at once, do you hear me?"

Fortunately there was another door which led from the girl's room. The cook swiftly made her exit but before she disappeared she assured Lillian that she would take a hand in the matter and inform Victor Talbot.

As soon as she arrived in the kitchen, Martha sat down and wiped the perspiration from her forehead.

"Gracious me," she muttered, breathing heavily, "that was a close shave. If Mrs. Crawford caught me siding with Lillian, I would surely lose my job. Well, I don't want to be kicked out now. That poor, unhappy girl needs my help, and she shall have it."

When she went back to the task of preparing the next meal, there was a look of quiet determination on her honest face.



Chapter 137

A DANGEROUS UNDERTAKING

VICTOR TALBOT was in a quandary. As soon as Lillian failed to meet him at the hour and place agreed upon, he suspected what had transpired. His first impulse was to go to Mrs. Crawford's home and demand to see the girl. But after mature reflection he realized the folly of such a move. He would be shown the door unceremoniously, and that would be the end.

And the one to suffer for his rashness would be Lillian. No, he could not bring himself to add a straw to her already heavy burden.

All during that day he drove past the Crawford estate in the vain hope of catching sight of the girl who was to become his wife.

Toward evening he saw Roger Hawkins come down the lane in his car, driving toward Chicago at top speed.

"Damn him!" Victor muttered under his breath. "I'd like to wring his neck!"

Upon his arrival home he decided to call up Mrs. Crawford and make one more plea. As luck would have it, Martha, the cook, answered the phone.

As soon as she found that Talbot was at the other end of the line, she spoke very rapidly and in a guarded tone.

"You better come over and see me," he advised before the woman had a good start. "Mrs. Crawford might overhear you and you'd lose your job."

Martha agreed with this.

She knew better than anyone else what her mistress was capable of in an emergency. She hung up the receiver and went back into the kitchen.

That night, under the cover of darkness, she stole out of the house and hurried over to the Talbot estate as fast as her old legs could carry her.

Victor was waiting for her, and at once took Martha into his den and locked the door.

"Now tell me all about it," he said eagerly.

In a voice at times trembling with anger, the woman let the cat out of the bag. She told of the conversation she overheard between Mrs. Crawford and Roger Hawkins.

"I don't know what to make of it, Mr. Talbot," she ended. "There is something rotten afoot. Lillian is to go with Hawkins alone on that yacht trip. I dread to think of her being left in the clutches of that man."

"But he means to marry her," Victor said glumly.

"Marry her nothing!" snorted Martha. "That man wouldn't marry any girl unless the law made him."

For a long moment Talbot stared at the woman without speaking.

He was struggling with a horrible idea that had come into his mind. Unconsciously Martha nodded, and then he knew.

"Good God!" he gasped. "Could such a thing be possible?"

"Yes," said Martha. "I am afraid it is not only possible, but it will be an accomplised fact unless something is done to prevent it. Mrs. Crawford hates her stepdaughter. And when one woman hates another, she stops at nothing.

"Poor Lillian will never come back the way she left if she is allowed to go with Hawkins. I pity the girl who is allowed to get into that man's hands. You must

do something to prevent that, Mr. Talbot."

"Then you believe that Mrs. Crawford deliberately seeks Lillian's moral destruction," said Victor in a hollow voice.

"That is exactly what I believe," reiterated the woman.

For a few minutes Talbot measured the floor in great restless strides.

He was utterly at a loss how to meet the situation. He was powerless to prevent the girl from going with Hawkins if her stepmother willed it so.

"By the way, Martha," he said, whirling and facing her, "are you quite sure that Lillian is to go alone with that man."

"No, there are a number of others in the yachting party," said Martha. "I remember some of the names for I saw the list on Mrs. Crawford's desk. But I think they are all of the same type as Hawkins."

"Who are they?" asked Victor hoarsely.

"Eleanor Baker, Lester Rushford and——" Here Talbot stopped her.

"Lester Rushford did you say?" he exclaimed. "Are you quite sure that is the name."

"I am positive," replied Martha.

Again Victor began pacing the floor. He knew Lester Rushford very well. In fact they had been intimate friends at college.

Suddenly an idea occurred to him and he chuckled to himself.

"Unless dear old Lester has changed considerably, I can count on him to help me," he murmured to himself. Then he turned to the woman and smiled. "You have done something for which I am very grateful, Martha. Here, that this, and buy yourself something you need."

Martha shook her head, her honest face crimson.

"I could not take your money, Mr. Talbot," she protested. "What I have done was for poor Lillian's sake. You don't know how miserable she is. If you can save her from that man Hawkins, I'll feel well repaid."

"I'll save her if it costs me my life!" cried Victor, his eyes flashing.

Martha left, well satisfied with her mission.

As soon as Talbot was alone, he did considerable telephoning.

He managed to get in touch with Lester Rushford, and their conversation which lasted for over half an hour, must have been satisfactory, for when Victor Talbot hung up the receiver there was a confident smile on his face.

Roger Hawkins' yacht was perhaps the largest pleasure steamer seen on the great lakes. It was modern in every particular and boasted of some features not seen on an ocean liner. "The Firefly," as he called her, had been the scene of many a wild party, for the owner used judgement and discretion in selecting his guests.

Prudes and those inclined to be critical and narrow in their views were never invited. You had to be a good sport, which applied to both sexes.

Another thing expected of you was a thorough disagreement with the well-known Eighteenth Amendment.

When Hawkins made up the party for this cruise he was particularly careful in selecting his guests.

Only the best people were asked, for he was anxious to display his high social standing before his latest

passion—the lovely Lillian Crawford.

It was for this reason, more than any other, that he insisted upon Lester Rushford being among the crowd. But he was not aware of the fact that Rushford was Victor Talbot's loyal friend.

The hour set for sailing was nine o'clock in the evening. The guests began to arrive at eight.

By fifteen minutes of nine they were all on board except Mr. Rushford. No one suspected that the latter had chosen to be late with a certain purpose in view.

As he was driven to the pier he was accompanied by a valet. He never went anywhere without his valet, but the one with him now was either new to the work, or afflicted with nervousness.

He was in fact no trained valet at all. He was none other than Victor Talbot in disguise.

In his desperation to be near Lillian in order to protect her, he had conceived the idea of prevailing upon Lester Rushford to take him along as a valet, and Rushford, having been made acquainted with the situation, and being a man of honor, readily consented.

But he knew and Talbot knew that it was not an easy matter to hoodwink a man like Roger Hawkins. So they used great care.

To change his appearance, Victor Talbot had sacrificed his cute little mustache. A dark wig and a few artistic lines about the mouth, aided by blackened eyebrows, completed the transformation.

Rushford, and his new valet, shrewdly contrived to come aboard in the dark.

They were met by the officer on duty instead of Hawkins himself, who, the officer explained, had been detained temporarily in the city.

They were shown to their quarters, a roomy cabin near the dining salon, decorated in bird's-eye maple with

guilt mouldings.

"The damned hound does things in style," Victor Talbot said grudgingly, after a critical survey. "I did not know they had such floating palaces on the lake."

Lester Rushford grinned and nodded.

"Yes, this boat must have cost him a neat sum, old man. I don't think we'll have any trouble making ourselves comfortable. I suppose I shall have to join the crowd at the late dinner. You better lie low, Victor. That is the best thing to do for the present."

"I am under your orders," the other replied.

"So you are," came back. "But don't forget that you also promised me to do nothing rash."

"You may rely on me to keep that promise," said Victor.

For the moment the unhappy lover was quite content with things as they were. He was aboard with Lillian, and he hoped to steal a few words with her at some opportune moment.

While Lester Rushford joined the guests in the dining salon, Talbot prepared to make the best of it during his absence.

Had anyone chanced to look into the cabin half an hour later, he might have thought that, for a well-trained valet, Mr. Rushford's man made remarkable free use of his master's cigars.

The first dinner on board was rather a stiff and formal affair, as most dinners are when all the guests are not thoroughly acquainted with each other. The crowd was larger than Rushford had expected.

He glanced eagerly down the long table in search of Lillian Crawford's face, but she was not present.

Roger Hawkins, who had arrived in time to play the host at the dinner, received his guests graciously enough.

"Glad to see you aboard, Lester," he cried as he shook hands warmly with Rushford. "I think you'll enjoy it. There is nothing like this lake breeze for bucking a man up.

"But by the way," he added with a peculiar smile, "I am sorry that they had to put you and your valet in the same cabin. You see, I did not think you'd bring your man."

Rushford began an apology for having presumed to bring his valet, but the genial host checked him with a gesture.

"My dear fellow," Hawkins interposed, "if you don't object to the arrangement there is no reason why I should. If you are both comfortable, nothing more need be said."

At this juncture they were joined by a rather overdressed, but still handsome woman past her youth.

"This is Mrs. Crawford," said Hawkins, introducing the woman.

For a moment Rushford was stunned into silence. He was under the impression that Mrs. Crawford had declined to join the party. He instinctively disliked the woman and scented danger in her presence.

He finally acknowledged the introduction in an awkward fashion, then excused himself to go to his cabin.

Victor Talbot was eagerly awaiting him.

"Well?" he asked, as soon as his friend closed the door, "how does the land lay?"

"Not so good," was the other's unsatisfactory retort. "Mrs. Crawford is aboard. Nothing worse could have happened to us. If she sets her alert eyes on you we can prepare for trouble."

Talbot swore softly under his breath.

"I'll take precious good care that she doesn't,"

he growled. "What kind of a crowd did you find aboard, Lester?"

"The kind of a crowd I expected," Rushford answered. "Most of them are rich idlers bent upon having a good time at any cost. So far as I am able to judge, few of them are really decent."

"When do we sail?" was Talbot's next question.

"Not until morning, Vic."

"Why not at once? I thought——"

"I am glad we are not sailing at once," Rushford broke in. "I just happened to remember that I forgot some things I shall need badly. It will give me a chance to go ashore and get them.

"But," he added, looking somewhat doubtfully at his friend, "I don't know whether it is safe to leave you alone. You see, there is no telling what might happen while I am away."

Victor Talbot laughed good-naturedly.

"Don't you worry about leaving me alone," he said. "I am not going to leave this cabin while you are away."

This seemed to reassure Rushford, and he at once prepared to go ashore. On his way to the pier he encountered the owner of the yacht and acquainted him with his purpose.

"That's alright, old man," Hawkins grinned. "Take your time."

In the meantime Victor Talbot had made himself comfortable in an easy chair and lit another cigar. But while physically at ease, his mind was in a state of forcibly subdued excitement. He knew that if Hawkins recognized him there would be trouble and plenty of it.

However, he did not, for a moment, regret the step he had taken.

He saw himself with new eyes — a man with a

man's responsibilities. The difficulties which lay before him only stimulated him to meet them.

His soul leaped up to face them, and a mad exultation surged over him becaus he loved and was loved in return.

He would rescue Lillian from Hawkins' clutches somehow, and as soon as they were married he would take her away from everything that reminded her of the past.

Rising, he took a few turns up and down the floor, then gazed out upon the placid waters of Lake Michigan. The moon floated serenly in a cloudless sky, bathing the even surface of the lake in silver.

Then suddenly, he became aware of the fact that the yacht was moving.

The low quiver which struck through the hull of the ship, the tremor of the screw shaft, could have but one meaening. And he could not be mistaken, for the lights of the city were slowly but surely receding in the distance.

"Good God!" he gasped. "What does it mean?"

Then, like a flash it dawned upon him. The yacht was making for the open sea. Either by accident or by design, Lester Rushford had been left behind.

Talbot was anything but calm. Slowly the full gravity of his position broke upon him, and he cursed his rashness for coming aboard. His mind was assailed by a hundred fears and doubts.

He heard the throb of the ship's engine as though it were a heart keeping time with his own.

Losing Rushford threw him entirely upon his own resources, and doubled his perplexities and peril. He had no idea in what part of the yacht were the quarters which Lillian Crawford occupied.

How he longed to hasten to her with the assurance

that he was present to protect her, to defend her with his own life if need be.

A dozen desperate schemes passed through his mind, and he was tempted to put one of them into immediate execution. But he allowed common sense to prevail after all.

A moment's cool reflection convinced him that the only sane course was to wait and see what the next morning brought forth.

Chapter 138

THROWN OVERBOARD.

THE yachting party seemed doomed to be a flat failure for several reasons. The main reason was that the guests did not mix. Neither would some of them drink. The usual wild scenes in the dining salon where they danced and caroused until the morning hours, did not take place because no one cared to participate.

This was a bitter disappointment to Roger Hawkins. With a dark scowl on his face he strode up and down the promenade deck, occasionally muttering something not intended for feminine ears.

It was now close to midnight and the yacht was quiet as a grave. Hawkins did not retire in spite of the late hour.

Sleep was out of the question. He hailed the sudden appearance of Mrs. Crawford with a low exclamation of joy.

"Ah, it was good of you to come and keep me company," he said as he pushed forward a chair for her. "Please have a seat."

The woman accepted the chair with a charming smile.

She was enjoying the trip very much in spite of the scant notice accorded her by a number of the party.

"I am glad of an opportunity to chat with you alone for a while, Roger," she replied. "Now first of all I would like to know how in the world you managed to pick up this crowd of dead ones. And such snobs. I

never saw anything like it. Some of them scarcely spoke to me."

The owner of the yacht shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Allow me to apologize for them, my dear Mrs. Crawford," he answered in an unsteady voice. "I realize that I was not a good picker. But we must make the best of it."

For about five minutes neither spoke. The woman shot an occasional glance in the direction of her companion.

There was an expression in her passionate eyes he woud not have failed to interpret correctly, had he seen it. But he didn't and her secret longing remained unsatisfied.

"At least you and I could enjoy ourselves if the others won't," she followed up. "Don't you think so, Roger?"

The latter did not heed this very palpable hint. He had not suggested this yachting party in order to have an opportunity to make love to Mrs. Crawford. Her lovely young stepdaughter was the game he was after.

"I was considerable hurt because Lillian refused to join us at dinner," he declared, ignoring what Mrs. Crawford had said.

"I am afraid the poor child is not well," responded Mrs. Crawford in a soft tone. "I had an awful time persuading her to come aboard. She won't leave her cabin."

"Couldn't you coax her to come on deck for a moment now?" the owner of the yacht said.

"Not a chance, my dear boy," the woman laughed.

"You see," Hawkins continued, "I am not used to being treated in that manner by any girl. I always get

what I go after. Lillian will never willingly become my wife.

"You agreed to my plan to help place her in a position where a speedy marriage with me would be the only thing to save her name in the eyes of the world. I hope you will not attempt to deny that. You know you agreed to my plan."

Mrs. Crawford nodded her head vigorously.

"I know I did," she admitted. "And I'll go through with it. But you must have a little patience. This is not the only night we are on board your yacht. You'll get your chance."

The woman was about to make a reply, when she noticed a dark figure approaching. She clutched her companion's arm.

"Look, who is that?" she whispered.

"That is Mr. Rushford's valet," was the quick retort. "I suppose he is wondering why his master was left behind. It was rather a shabby trick," he added with a chuckle.

Mrs. Crawford shrugged her shapely shoulders in a manner that suggested that she considered the marooning of Rushford the best thing that could have happened. She did not like the man and made no secret of it.

It was indeed Victor Talbot who came strolling along. Not being able to sleep, he had decided to go out in the fresh air for a while.

But he had reckoned with the probability that he would not encounter anyone. So when he saw Hawkins and Mrs. Crawford seated together, he came to a dead stop for a moment.

His first impulse was to beat a hasty retreat. But he realized quickly that such a move would arouse suspicion immediately.

He walked on with all the carelessness he was able to assume.

As he was about to pass the couple, the owner of the yacht hailed him.

"You are Mr. Rushford's valet, I believe," Hawkins said as he rose quickly. "I am very sorry your master was left behind. But we shall probably pick him up when we reach Milwaukee. There is nothing to worry about, my man."

Victor mumbled a few words of thanks, and with a clumsy salute passed, glad to escape the scrutiny of those keen eyes.

For an instant he thought he saw a look of recognition in them, but the expression was so slight that he was not sure.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he returned to his cabin, and felt pleased with his well planned disguise.

However, he registered a mental vow to give the owner of the yacht a wide berth so long as he remained on board.

Talbot had neglected to lock the door of the cabin, which proved to be a most serious mistake.

He had just lit another cigar and was about to seat himself, when the door was pushed open from without. Rogers Hawkins stepped in with a peculiar grin on his face.

He closed the door carefully behind him and approached the supposed valet.

"Surely I can't be mistaken," he said drily. "I have the pleasure of seeing Mr. Victor Talbot among my guests."

Talbot's consternation was so great that no words came to his lips with which to return this mocking greeting. Hawkins noticed the man's obvious embarrassment and chuckled.

"You don't seem inclined to speak, Mr. Talbot," he said.

Again silence.

"You like to give me surprises, don't you?" the other went on suavely. "But surely, this is the strangest of them all. I certainly did not except to see you aboard my yacht.

"Since you are here your presence will save me a lot of trouble. But why masquerade in this fashion? It seems so foolish. So far as I can see there is not the least justification or reason for it."

There was a ring of sardonic mockery in the speaker's voice as he finished.

Victor realized that he had been caught in his own trap.

He realized also that a graceful exit was impossible. There was nothing to do but put up a bold front.

"Mr. Hawkins," he retorted, "I am quite sure explanations are unnecessary. Miss Lillian Crawford is on board this yacht, probably as a prisoner. I knew that she was brought here against her own inclination, and I, as her affianced husband, am here to see to it that no harm comes to her.

"I agree with you that I have been foolish, but I warn you not to get too sarcastic. You must realize and admit that I was fully justified in coming aboard in disguise."

The owner of the yacht laughed a dry, throaty laugh and advanced a step.

"Come now, Talbot," he said contemptuously, "you are either a fool or a hero. I warned you once never to cross my path again, and yet I find you here on my own yacht playing the valet.

"For a man who makes it his business to meddle with other people's affairs, you are the most impudent

How do you know that you will ever feel dry land again? You have not the least assurance that you will, old man.'

The words were spoken lightly, but with an intention the other could not fail to preceive.

And Victor Talbot did not underestimate the volcano of malice that smoldered behind his enemy's exterior.

He felt that the man before him would commit any crime in the calendar in order to get a sweet, pure girl like Lillian Crawford into his clutches.

"Are you threatening me?" he demanded hoarsely.

"You can take what I said as you like," came back quickly. "As the owner of this ship I can do pretty well what I please with a man who is not my invited guest."

Talbot uttered a laugh that was rather forced.

"Mr. Hawkins," he remarked, grasping desperately at his fading courage, "I am not quite the fool you think me to be. Please credit me with having at least a grain of common sense and prudence. I could scarcely stand here as I do had I not measured the danger and provided against it.

"If I fail to return to Chicago at a given time there are a few of my good friends who will know where to look for me.

"If anything happens to me aboard your yacht, you will be held to account. And now I repeat that Miss Crawford is virtually a prisoner aboard, and as soon as we reach Milwaukee I shall inform the police."

Victor had spoken with all the composure at his command, for it was his only defense. The owner of the pleasure craft smiled.

"Don't gamble on that too much, my dear friend," he said. "Queer accidents happen at times. It is by no means uncommon for a man to fall overboard during the

night. I happen to know that such things have happened.

"The chances are you'll never see Milwaukee. That may sound like a foolish threat, but I never make such a threat without backing it up. Remember that."

Something like fierce anger rose in Talbot. He was most emphatically not a coward.

"Listen, Hawkins!" he cried. "You can't bluff me. I don't doubt for a moment that you would murder me in cold blood if you saw a chance to get away with it without being caught. But you know that they still hang men for murder in the Cook County Jail.

"What do you suppose will happen if I am found to be missing when we reach the next port? There will be an inquiry, and Lester Rushford will start it. I dare say I have as many loyal friends as you have."

This time Hawkins' laugh held derision.

"I don't know about that, nor do I care a whole lot," he shot back with a sneer. "Of course, the sad fate of Mr. Rushford's valet," he put particular emphasis on the last three words, "will naturally cast a gloom over the party. That is a pity, but it can't be helped.

"You have sneaked on my yacht in disguise like a thief, and I am perfectly justified in putting you in irons. Coming aboard one's yacht without having been invited is the same as invading a man's home."

For a long moment the speaker paused, keenly watching the effect his words had.

Presently he contiued:

"At a single word from me, you would be a dead man, Talbot. And who would be likely to connect the lost valet with Mr. Victor Talbot? Your dear friend Rushford, you'll say. He may suspect, but for some very good reasons he will keep silent.

"And even if Lester Rushford should choose to

give the matter publicity, his word would not hold against mine.

"Please do not overlook the fact that I am the absolute master of the present situation, my dear Talbot. This yacht is my personal property, and I can do on it just as I feel like."

There was no boasting in Hawkins' statements. He was laying the cards on the table, face up, and with perfect frankness.

Talbot realized that he had been caught in a net, and that every move he made would draw that net more tightly about him.

And he had but to look at his rival's distorted features to know the danger he was in. Hawkins looked the fiend incarnate.

Victor Talbot did not make a reply because words failed him utterly.

"You see," the other spoke again, "That I have you completely in my power. Perhaps I am a fool, but I feel inclined to give you one chance. The question is, will you take it?"

"I will answer that when yon tell me what you expect of me," Talbot retorted.

"Oh, I will tell you, and if you value your life, you better take the chance I am about to offer you," came back. "I hope that by this time you have come to the conclusion that Lillian Crawford can never marry you. She belongs to me.

"Why don't you compromise and marry her stepmother? Mrs. Crawford is a mighty handsome woman even if she is past thirty. And she is very fond of you. In fact she loves you desperately. I say this because I happen to know it."

It took every ounce of Victor Talbot's willpower to keep him from strangling Hawkins on the spot.

For a moment plain murder was in his eyes, but he managed to restrain himself. Nothing could be gained by violence.

"You will never make Lillian Crawford your wife so long as I am able to prevent it!" he snarled.

"Won't I?" Hawkins laughed.

"No, you won't!"

"How are you going to prevent it, Talbot?"

"I'll prevent it,never fear," was the quick retort. "Now go ahead and do your worst. I am not the least bit frightened."

What Talbot evidently expected, did not take place. The owner of the yacht bowed. He bowed with great deliberation.

"Very well, so be it," he said. And with a deadly smile he left the cabin.

Finding himself alone, Victor Talbot's first inclination was to follow Hawkins and fight it out with him then and there.

What if the men under Hawkins were hired murderers? At least he would have a chanc for his life.

He sprang toward the door, but to his great dismay he found it locked from the outside.

"Damn the hound!" he hissed through his set teeth. "No doubt he thinks he has me cornered. I'll show him a new trick or two!"

Then, all of a sudden, as he fought down his fiery temper by pacing the floor, he felt a strange languor coming over him.

What did it mean?

He swayed unsteadily and clutched at the little fixed table for support. Then his mental faculties became benumbed, and his legs began to weaken under him. He began to perspire.

Continued in next number

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